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Remarks as Prepared for Delivery by Assistant Secretary Kendler at the Women in Strategic Trade Conference: Promoting Gender Diversity in Your Organization

October 24, 2023

I am thrilled to be back here for a second year at the Women in Strategic Trade (WiST) Conference. It's such a joy for me personally and professionally to meet others throughout the world who are devoting their talents to the important work of strategic trade controls. Thank you all for being here, and for sharing in this experience. In particular, thank you to the WIST Secretariat, and the Government of Malaysia for your hospitality.

This afternoon, I've been asked to talk to about the need for gender diversity in the strategic trade field and how we can foster it. To me, the need is straightforward.

The full participation of all people, including people of all genders — across all aspects of our society — is essential to the economic well-being, health, and security of a Nation and of the world. If you'll allow me to generalize — I recognize that doing so loses a lot of individual nuance — women, in particular, tend to bring into policy conversations sensibilities that may be different from those of men. For example, based on lived experience, women may be more focused on the needs of vulnerable populations. This sensibility needs to be part of the conversation.

Our voice is especially important today, in our shared, digitally-driven future. The world is undergoing a fundamental digital transformation that is changing the way we live, work, and think. Emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, machine learning, and the internet are shaping every aspect of modern society, including national security.

I know I'm not the only person in the room with personal and professional anxiety that — over the course of the next decade, during the course of my career — nations around the world will face a unique geopolitical environment framed by great power competition, extreme climate events, and accelerating technological disruption. I worry that wars will be fought on land, on the sea, in cyberspace, and potentially in outer space. I worry that machines may replace human soldiers in making targeting decisions and that autonomous weapons systems may be leveraged to overwhelm conventional weapons systems, replacing sound decision-making and the moral pause that humans making decisions instill into the heat of war. Military minds may be imagining the strategic advantages of these new technologies. I imagine the human costs.

In the strategic trade environment, just last week we issued new rules aimed at controlling artificial intelligence — a prime example of dual-use technological advancement that demonstrates my point. I'm amazed by the potential of AI to benefit civil society — curing disease, for example — but I'm also deeply worried about the use of AI to model new nuclear weapons and hypersonic missiles.

It is precisely *because* advanced technology brings both benefits and concerns that we need to broaden the set of problem solvers from all backgrounds. We need deep thinkers in our community who understand this complex scientific and technological landscape *and* who can be strong voices for restraint, balanced decision-making, social welfare, and peace.

President Biden encapsulated the importance of engaging all genders when he said: “Beyond the moral imperative to advancing gender equity and gender equality around the world; beyond principles of justice and fairness; beyond clear notions of right and wrong, it’s just basic math.... We know that everyone in a society does better when everyone participates. Economies grow. Poverty shrinks. Education rates and health outcomes improve. Political instability and extremism decline.”

Inclusion elevates voices that drive our global, strategic, and humanitarian successes.

Beyond the rationale for engaging all genders, our challenge lies in achieving gender diversity in the field of strategic trade.

We start with developing strong building blocks. We have an obligation to break down barriers for women looking to enter the industry. Getting more young women to pursue these careers is just the beginning. Our challenge also lies in helping them thrive in their careers.

The Brookings Institute says that “more than half of graduate students of international affairs are female... But this surge of talent is not reflected in the upper ranks.”

To drive this change, all of us must mentor women. Certainly, events like this wonderful WiST conference play an important role, and they are more important than ever. Special events for women in a male-dominated fields facilitate the exchange of ideas and provide a place to openly discuss — and receive support — on career decisions, managing workplace complexities, addressing family and social pressures, and on constructively intervening in forums dominated by men. We need to take this spirit home with us. Continue engaging in these conversations with your teams at home, to encourage future generations of strategic trade leaders.

During her visit to Nontraditional Employment for Women in NYC earlier this year, my boss, Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo said, “Investing in women is not just a matter of fairness; we risk falling behind if we fail to support bringing more women into the workforce.”

As we pursue this goal, also keep in mind that we are pushing back against gendered assumptions. A Harvard Business Review study noted that women tend to be evaluated based on their performance while men tend to be evaluated based on their potential. This is one example of many gendered findings of the challenges women face in the workplace. Another finding is

that women offer ideas, only to find that men repeat the idea and are then given the credit for the idea.

Gendered assumptions and behavior are difficult to change, but part of the answer is to have more women in senior leadership. And then once we are in senior leadership, we need to reverse these gendered behaviors. We need to stress the potential of women when we talk to other leaders, and make sure that for men performance matters as much as potential.

I intentionally bring women with me to the decision-making table, and I make sure that their voices are part of the conversation. I do this by—if necessary—serving as a traffic director that quiets domineering voices while making space, seeking out, praising, and giving credit to the ideas that women interject into the conversation. I play this role because I understand what it is like to be a woman in a room of men. My whole career, I have wanted a seat at the decision-making table. Now, I have this seat, and when I show up, I bring women with me.

Systems weren't designed for women, so we need to work harder once they are at the table to keep them at the table.

I've taken the liberty of working with my team to draft an action plan. This isn't the only way forward. We're eager for you to take our ideas as a starting point and build on them.

1. First, we should be intentional in meeting people where they are.

Women, and people of other underrepresented genders, have had to face greater obstacles in the workplace than their male counterparts, from bias to harassment to simple logistics. When we support women as individuals and create an environment that they can thrive in, that's when they can truly bring their full selves to our organizations.

2. Second, be visible.

Women in positions of power open doors for other women. When women see other women in leadership roles, they have higher career aspirations. And the absence of women in leadership which can be demotivating. One of my new staff members told me that having a woman in a leadership role was a factor in deciding her most recent career moves. And I'm lucky to now have her contributing to my team at BIS.

3. Third, provide mentorship and inspire others to see themselves as mentors.

Studies have shown that when employees have a mentor, retention rates increase by up to 22% and mentees are promoted 5 times more often compared to those without a mentor. Organizations in the United States like the Society for Women Engineers work to drive up representation of women in technology positions, in part by facilitating mentorship programs at scale. In FY21, SWE had 2,709 mentees.

4. Fourth, publicly and loudly recognize good work by women.

We need to promote women at least the same rate as men. Recognition in the form of compliments and awards enhance the cause of pay equity, because it creates a credential of value in salary and promotion setting.

5. Fifth, create an environment that recognizes the career trajectory of women may be different than that of men.

Anne-Marie Slaughter – former Director of Policy Planning at the State Department, who now runs a major Washington, DC think tank, has written about how caregivers — who can be men but most often are women — need the space to be a caregiver without destroying their career. Caregiving periods end. We need to provide employees with flexible workplace policies that create space for caregiving when it is needed.

6. Sixth, create an ecosystem for success, and speak loudly and repeatedly about how this ecosystem requires gender diversity.

According to research conducted by McKinsey Global Institute on diversity within the STEM ecosystem, “gender parity uncovers the productive potential of half of the talent pool, and could add up to \$28 trillion to annual GDP by 2025.” This calls to mind the quote from Secretary Raimondo that I shared earlier. If companies do not take advantage of women’s full economic potential, economies will suffer. In the age of the digital revolution, closing the gender gap in the technology sector is more than morally correct, it is strategic – more women means increased innovation and global cooperation.

The women that came before me paved the way for me personally to have a seat at the table. All of us in this room who are fortunate to be here today will pave the way for the next generation of women leaders in national security, international trade, science, technology, and engineering. That’s why the relationships we build are so important, so that we can build community and therefore a pipeline for women in our ever-changing world.

Everything that I just said in my action plan can be and should be done by both women *and* men in leadership positions. We *all* can lead by example, by speaking about the importance of gender diversity and the need to change the work-place environment. We each have the responsibility to educate ourselves about how gender plays a role in our own societies and workplaces, to end our indifference or even blindness to gender inequalities, and to transform gendered practices.

In our field particularly, this is an ethical imperative in our day and age. Where national security, technology, and international trade meet, we must be the leaders committed to building and sustaining inclusive workplaces. Strategic trade leadership must reflect the diversity of society, just as our controls affect all of society. Please join me in a commitment to use our leadership roles to promote these goals.

I look forward to collaborating with all of you over the course of this event and am excited to hear from our extraordinary panelists.

Thank you.